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Replacement

*Everybody knew who Ed was.
Ed was famous. That's what
made it easy to kill him.*

BY JACK RITCHIE



If he hadn't been Ed Kubak, he could have disappeared almost anywhere and I never would have found him, even with the connections I have. He could have lost himself in any city in the country and been safe from me.

But he was Ed Kubak and that made it impossible. He had been my boss once and every hood across the country knew Ed. They knew his face and they knew that I would give fifteen grand just to know where he was.

I didn't have to chase after Ed.

I stayed where I was and let other eyes do the finding for me. I waited and thought about Helen and about the organization that was mine now. I thought about the city that was mine now.

Ed had been alone on top when I was still a collector making the rounds from bookie joint to bookie joint. He'd been a king while my feet were still walking the dirt. But my eyes were looking up, ready for the break when it came and even ready to make the break myself.

And the break came when Stacey Hanlon made the mistake of getting drunk and running out of money the same night. Stacey was one of Kubak's top muscle boys and not too bright even when he was sober. And with nearly a quart under his belt, Stacey went back to the old days and walked into a grocery store to pick up a little change.

He picked a little store run by an old man who should have been silly scared and begged Stacey to take every cent in the cash register. But the brittle old man wasn't scared and he kept a .38 under the counter.

When Stacey finished trying to cough the slugs out of his lungs and coughed out his life instead, there was a job vacant close to Ed Kubak, and I decided it was going to be mine.

It was easy to get to Ed's door. I simply took the elevator as high as it would go and then walked up a flight of iron stairs and I was right there. But from then on it got hard.

Two big men with cautious eyes opened it slow and not too far. Neither one of them was quite as big as I was, but still there were two of them and so I smiled politely.

"Yeah?" one of them said, squinting against the smoke from his cigarette.

"I'm here with the week's take," I said, holding up the briefcase.

He frowned at me.

"I'm a collector," I said. "Horse parlors."

"Sonny," he said, taking the butt from his lips. "You must be shiny new or you'd know better than to bring it up here. Take it to Sullivan, he has charge of the collections."

"I know," I said. "But Sullivan's in there, isn't he?"

"So?" the one who didn't smoke and had red hair said. "Sullivan's got an office with maybe twenty clerks. Why the personal delivery?"

"It's a secret between him and me," I said. "He'll get peeved if I don't see him."

Their hard eyes kept sizing me up while they tried to make up their minds. I raised my arms above my head. "I'm clean," I said. "And I don't bite very hard."

The man who probably everybody called Red went over me with his hands and through the briefcase. He eyed the other one and shrugged. "We can ask."

They let me inside and I was in a small carpeted hall with a very solid door at the other end. Red went to that door and pressed a buzzer.

A wide man with no hair let us see his face. Red spoke. "Ask Sullivan if he wants to see . . ." he thumbed at me.

"Warren," I said. "Max Warren."

Baldy closed the door and there were just the three of us to stare at each other.

I smiled gently and let the briefcase slip out of my fingers. Their eyes instinctively followed it as it thudded to the floor and I took that second to drive a shoulder-powered right to Red's lean jaw. He had just time to look surprised before he dropped and that left me and the cigarette smoker. His hand went for his side pocket and he almost got out the automatic before I got to him.

I made sure they were sleeping, stepped on the cigarette smoldering on the rug and went to the second door and waited.

In a few minutes, Baldy opened it. "Sullivan says to throw the . . ."

My hand on his face stopped the conversation and I shoved hard. He teetered on his heels and then sat down hard. I stepped over him and into the room.

About a dozen people's eyes were on me and whatever they had been talking about died in quiet. Hands went for shoulder holsters and I was facing five steady guns.

Sullivan got the brunette off his lap and rose, his face flushed. "Damn it, Max," he said. "When I say I don't want to see you, then you don't get seen."

I turned toward Kubak. He was a

heavy paunched man with dark brown eyes. His face was sallow and jowled and he breathed in a deep tired wheeze.

"I came to see you, Mr. Kubak," I said. "Not Sullivan."

A small flicker of interest came into his eyes. "Then why ask for Sullivan?"

"Would you have seen me?"

"No," he said.

"So I asked for Sullivan. That got me half way in and I took it from there." I met his eyes. "You'll need somebody to replace Stacey Hanlon."

His eyes traveled over me and the sound of his heavy breathing was the only noise in the room. Finally he said, "Stacey was tough."

I gave him time to hear Red groaning his way to consciousness behind me. "Do I look like I carry daisies?"

Kubak smiled slightly and looked at the others. He took the cigar out of his mouth. "Sullivan," he said. "Fix the man a drink."

Stacey's job didn't have much work connected with it and the pay was good. Mostly I'd just stick close to Kubak, mix his drinks, light his cigars, and give him a feeling of security. But once in a while I'd get a word from Kubak and leave for a couple of hours. Occasionally I'd have to clean my gun before reporting back to Kubak, but not as often as I'd expected. All some people need is a friendly word or maybe

just a little rough stuff to make them realize it was bad to irritate Kubak.

I rode beside Kubak in the big limousine, always stepped out first, just in case, and got to all the drinking parties that Kubak did. That was why I was there when Sullivan brought Helen Wesley along.

I always thought that was stupid of Sullivan, but then I never thought much of his brain power in the first place. If I owned her, I'd make sure to keep her away from anybody who had more money than I did. But I suppose Sullivan thought that Kubak was too old and tired to be interested, and Sullivan couldn't have been more wrong.

We were celebrating our expansion over the county line when Helen came in on Sullivan's arm. And the second she walked in you saw that the rest of the women in the room were just dames who talked too loud and went heavy on the make-up.

Helen was a honey blonde with brown eyes and your first look was enough to tell you that money was the only thing that could make her melt. Not that she looked hard, but it was there just the same.

I was sitting next to Kubak when Sullivan brought her over and that was the first time I'd ever seen him struggle to his feet when he was introduced to a woman.

She looked at him with open calculation and then met my eyes. I grinned until she looked away.

Kubak hovered around her all evening and I noticed that she was more to him than a sparkle in the eye. It went a lot deeper than that.

And Sullivan knew it too, because he hit the bottle hard and by the time the party broke up, he had to be carried out. I had Red toss him over his shoulder and take him to his car. Red drove Sullivan to his place and I took Helen to her apartment in my car.

She didn't complain when I followed her upstairs and into her apartment. Silently she made drinks and handed one to me.

"Hello," I said.

She lit a cigarette and went to the other side of the room.

I smiled at her. "All you want from me is information. Isn't that right?"

She stared out of the window, frowning slightly in thought, and then turned. "Sullivan told me he was the boss," she said.

"Once in a while he thinks so." I put my feet on the hassock and relaxed. "And now you're dissatisfied."

Her eyes flickered over me. "Are you anybody important? I'd like to know if I have to be polite."

"No," I said. "You'll have to love me for my personality alone."

Helen drew slowly on her cigarette. "Kubak fell hard. Do you think there'll be any trouble if I say goodbye to Sullivan?"

"That depends," I said. "Whether he thinks you're worth trouble."

She smiled. "I'll keep out of the way until it's over."

I set my drink down, got up, and walked over to her.

She stood stiff and still. "It'll be cold. Ice cold."

I took her in my arms and it was cold. Her lips were firm, unyielding. And then as I held her tighter I could feel the beginnings of a thaw.

She pushed me away quickly.

"I understand," I said, grinning. "Raised on the wrong side of the tracks. Old man drunk all the time and beat you. Left home at fourteen. Had crummy jobs. Waiting on tables? Or was it burlesque? Finally decided that all work and no money was not for Helen. Tell me about it. I like those kind of stories. They make me want to cry."

She flushed slightly. "Don't forget your hat."

I picked it up and walked toward the door. "Kubak usually starts off with flowers, but don't be disappointed. The big stuff will come after a week or so."

The next day Kubak sent me out twice. Once in the morning and once in the afternoon. In the afternoon I brought the paper he wanted, opened it, and laid it on his lap.

He read the headlines and the lead story. "It says that Sullivan and a small-time bookie had a shooting disagreement somewhere way out in the country. No survivors."

"That's what it says."

He glanced back at the paper. "No witnesses either and nobody heard the shots. But the cops think it happened about ten. That right?"

"Closer to ten-thirty," I said.

He folded the newspaper and sat back. "See that he gets a pretty funeral. The bookie too."

I handed him a cigar from the humidor and lit it.

"And so?" he asked. "I think you got something on your mind."

"And so you'll have to replace Sullivan," I said. "I thought you ought to know that I can read, write, and add."

"That's nice," he said. He closed his eyes for almost a minute. "All right. You got his job. I don't care what you read or write, but don't make any mistakes when it comes to adding." His eyes opened. "And don't get too ambitious. I'll be watching you."

But he didn't watch me and that was what I was counting on. His eyes and his brain were busy with Helen.

I was grateful to her for what she was doing to Kubak. Sure, she was doing it for her own reasons, but it helped me too.

I had my shoulder in the door now and I eased in. Helen was good at making Kubak forget business, and it wasn't long before the boys came to me when a decision had to be made. Kubak couldn't be bothered.

I worked slow and careful at first,

not taking too much on my shoulders, but the boys soon got the idea I was trying to put across. Kubak was slipping, he was getting old.

I even let drop a word or two that I thought Kubak's take was too big. I let it be known that the fact saddened me and that I thought there ought to be some adjustment.

It took about six months before I was sure enough of where I stood to call a meeting of the big boys and not let Kubak know about it. I brought the whole thing into the open and in fifteen minutes we all agreed that Kubak needed a vacation. It took a little longer for them to see that I was big enough to take his place. They tried to put up some argument, but I talked bigger than I had and they decided to go along with me.

At Kubak's next party we sat there smiling at him until finally he noticed that the smiles were a lot different from the ones he was used to getting.

I got up, rapped on a glass with my cigarette lighter for silence, and looked at him in a kindly fashion.

Kubak sat up straighter, a frown forming on his forehead.

"Kubak," I said. "We've noticed that you've seemed tired lately."

"The hell I am," he snapped.

I smiled at Helen and looked back at him. "In fact we've decided unanimously that you need a vacation."

His brown eyes were hard. "You're not shoving me out."

"You could argue about it," I said. "But I don't think you'll have much help."

His eyes went from face to face and he lost some of his color.

"But we don't like arguments," I said gently. "You know how tempers will flare and how messy things get for the loser." I paused. "And so if you take this real quiet, I think you'll have a nice happy old age to look forward to in some warm climate."

Kubak's head turned from face to face again and suddenly he became old. He sighed tiredly and I could feel some of the tension leave my body. We had won and the boys got up and headed for the door.

I lingered behind until they were gone. I picked up Helen's ermine and draped it over my arm. "Ready?" I asked.

Kubak turned sharply toward Helen. She was considering him dispassionately, weighing the pros and cons.

His eyes were bewildered. "Helen! Don't even think about leaving me!"

"I'm the boss now," I said softly. "The head man."

She glanced at Kubak once more and then came toward me.

Kubak rose from his chair, his voice desperate. "Helen! You know I love you."

I put the ermine around her shoulders.

Kubak tried once more. I could tell that now he realized what Helen

was, but he wanted her anyway. "I have money, Helen," he said quietly. "A lot of money."

Helen hesitated and I smiled at her. "Well, baby?"

Our eyes met and I knew what she was deciding. *Kubak has money, but I think you'll have a lot more some day.*

I held open the door and she walked out.

"Max," Kubak said, tightness in his voice. "I love her and nobody is going to have her if I can't."

I stepped into the hall and shut the door behind me.

Kubak left town at the end of the week, but he stopped to do something before he did.

It was the afternoon I got the new Jaguar that I found out Kubak's last words to me weren't just hot air. I went up to Helen's apartment and when I used the key I walked into a room full of cops.

They showed me Helen where she was lying on the bedroom floor. There was no bleeding now from the brown-stained front of her dress and she was icy cold when I touched her.

There might have been trouble for me, except that I'd spent the time the cops pin-pointed for the killing at the auto show room and three salesmen could verify that fact.

They questioned me for a couple of hours, but I had nothing to tell them. I knew that eventually they would get the connection between

Kubak and Helen and they would begin looking for him. But that would take time, and I wanted Kubak to get away. At least from the cops.

When they were through with me, I went to my apartment and began phoning. I let it get around that I wanted to find Kubak and that it was worth fifteen thousand to me. I just wanted to know where he was. I didn't want a hair of his head touched and I didn't want the police in on it.

It was two months before I got the telegram from Palm Beach. "A friend of yours is here," it said. "Be sure to bring the fifteen grand." It was signed Rieber.

It was near nightfall when the plane brought me in and I was met by a short wiry man wearing a yellow sport shirt. "The name's Rieber," he said.

We got in his car and drove out of the airport.

"You sure about this?" I asked.

He had a permanent tight smile on his face as his eyes watched the road. "You'll spend the dough tonight."

He switched on his headlights. "He's in a small motor court outside the city. It's pretty run down so there aren't many customers to bother you. I got a boy watching so he don't decide to move."

We drove half an hour and then Rieber braked the car and turned smoothly into a motor court. He stopped the car and pointed. "Over

there," he said. "The one with the light in the window. No. 24."

I walked toward the cabin with my .45 in my hand. I took it carefully and on tiptoe and went around to a side window.

Kubak sat at a small table, a quart of bourbon in front of him and next to it a glass tumbler more than half filled with the stuff.

I went around to the front and turned the knob slowly. The door was unlocked and I pushed it open.

Kubak looked up at me without surprise. He seemed a lot older now. The skin on his face hung in tired flaps and his eyes were deep sunk and weary.

He fingered the glass of bourbon for a moment and then sighed. He put it on the window sill. "You found me because I stopped running, Max," he said.

"Drink the whiskey," I said. "It might make it easier."

His eyes went to the glass and then away. "I'm a dying man, Max," he said. "You could wait another month and you wouldn't have to bother." He looked up. "Liver, kidneys, everything inside worn out and gone bad. But mostly the heart."

"A month is too long, Kubak. Your troubles are over right now."

Kubak looked at me curiously. "You didn't love her, Max. Not enough so that you'd take care of this personally. What makes you mad is that somebody took away

something you thought was yours."

"She *was* mine, Kubak. Sure I loved her."

Kubak rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I'm the one who really loved her. I loved her so much I was blind to what she was. But even when I knew, I still loved her."

I was getting impatient. "No prayers and no drink?" My finger tightened on the trigger.

It was a clean shot and he died easy. There was just that shock in the eyes of a man when he realizes that death is not quite what he expected and then he dropped.

I picked up the glass of bourbon from the window sill and downed it in a few gulps. "I loved her as much as you did," I said.

The drink burned in my stomach. I went to the water tap and swallowed a glass of water and waited for the burning to stop.

But it didn't stop. It got worse and worse until I doubled over, holding my stomach. I looked at Kubak lying there and suddenly I knew about the whiskey. I knew why Kubak had stopped running. That drink was supposed to be his last one on earth. But he had left it for me. For my victory drink. For my death drink.

I began cursing then. I cursed because of the white hot pain and because I was afraid to die and because I wished I had never seen Helen.

I hoped she was in hell.